

Love Is Our True Identity

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Preaching on:

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Luke 4:21–30

How long do you have to live somewhere before you can say you're *from* there? When I lived in New York City the standard advice was that you had to have lived there for ten years before you could call yourself a "New Yorker." You might live like a New Yorker, walk, eat, dress, even talk like a New Yorker, but don't you dare say that you're *from* New York unless you've put in your ten years' time. In small towns I hear it can be even worse than in the big cities. I've heard stories from friends about living somewhere 30, 40 years—most of their lives—and still being seen as an outsider because they weren't born there.

You'll remember from last week that Jesus is in his hometown, Nazareth, preaching at the synagogue he grew up in. In the Gospels, Jesus is often referred to as "Jesus of Nazareth," so all that would seem to settle it. Jesus may have been born in Bethlehem, he may have spent his earliest years as a refugee, but Jesus is *from* Nazareth. We're eager, of course, to claim Jesus as our very own, but at times like this, when Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," we're happy to assume that his words only apply to Nazareth and not to New Jersey: He was talking about the synagogue, not the Church. He was talking about the Jews, not the Christians.

This is what I call reading the Bible on the first floor. When you take an overly literalistic view of scripture, because the events in scripture take place thousands of years ago, it's easy to sidestep a lot of Jesus' most pointed criticism. And this is the source of a good deal of the Christian Church's antisemitism—trying to heap Jesus' critiques on somebody other than ourselves, so that we don't have to wrestle with the ways God is speaking to us here and now. So, when the Bible tells us that Jesus' own people rejected him, that his own people crucified him, that his own people demanded in one moment that he heal them and in the next moment they tried to toss him off a cliff for suggesting that God's promises and God's love were bigger than their parochial vision, we can assure ourselves that that's what those people did then, and it's not what we do now.

But how long do you have to live somewhere before you're from there? Jesus has been with the Christian Church for almost 2,000 years. He may have been born in Bethlehem, may have been raised in Nazareth, but by now he must be from here. We're the hometown crowd now. The words of scripture are both historical and present; they had an original context and that they a deeply personal dimension. Counterintuitively, as we leave the first floor of Bible reading behind and climb higher to see the bigger picture, scripture becomes more accessible, more immediate, more uncomfortable. The question, "How and why did the people of Nazareth reject Jesus?" is interesting to scholars and historians. The question, "How and why are we rejecting Jesus?" is essential to all of us. What is it that causes the people who are closest to Jesus to reject him?

I'm going to call it "ego," but let me go a little deeper on what I mean here. I don't mean that only the most stereotypically egotistical narcissists reject Jesus. I mean that the thing that causes all of us who are closest to Jesus to reject him and his mission of love and justice for everybody is ego. Ego is the

idea that my identity as myself is more important and more real than my identity in God. Ego is the idea that my individuality is more important and more real than my relationships. Ego is a fortress that I've built out of my desires, my fears, my hopes, my dreams, my ambitions, my selfishness, my greed, my grudges, my comfort, myself. I've built this fortress brick by brick to protect me from a dangerous, unpredictable world. But the fortress of ego, unfortunately, is much better at keeping God out than it is at keeping out pain or misfortune. It's better at turning away intimacy and community than it is at offering us any sense of actual fulfillment in this life.

Jesus' mission is to knock down the fortresses of sin—the fortresses of separation between us and God, between us and other people. But we want it both ways. We want individual salvation from a personal savior who will let us hide out behind the comfort of our walls. But that ain't the way it works. When we experience God in those mountaintop spiritual moments of life, we feel it then—this dizzying sense of connection and intimacy that suggests to us that when I was created in the Image of God, I was made to be more than an "I."

And when we peek out over the edge of that nest and look out into that wide open sky, ego is the one who pulls us back from ledge. And ego will do whatever it takes to make us think we can't live without him. And ego uses whatever is at hand to make us hate, to make us ignore, to make us reject the one who came to make us believe we could be free. And that, I believe, is how and why the people who are closest to Jesus reject Jesus. Because Jesus is love. And love, properly understood, is the great ego dissolver. And attached to our egos as we are we fear more than anything what the poet Eliot called, "A condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)."

And with all of this in mind we're ready to turn to the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, a chapter that has become so obligatory at wedding ceremonies that we hardly catch the flavor of just how radical and transformative Paul's vision of love truly is. We hear Paul saying, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious; it does not insist on its own way; love never ends," and we can hardly believe him. Because we've seen the ways that love can go bad and go sideways. But that's when love is controlled by our egos, when love is just another brick in the wall. And that's not love properly understood. That's desire, that's dependence, that's manipulation, that's a psychological bind, but it's not the view of love from the top floor.

For Paul, love is the agent of God's transformation and the final determinator of all meaning and purpose in human affairs. Has there ever been a more radical statement in all of theology and philosophy than, "And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing"? That's an astounding statement, and one often skipped over at weddings because it's a statement about the ultimate meaninglessness of these achieving, separating egos we walk around inside of all day. Write those words down and hang them up somewhere where you'll see them every day. Because until we believe those words, we don't know God and we don't know ourselves.

When you read scripture from the first floor, you can get lost in the maze of it all. But when you climb high enough to see the patterns, you begin to find your way, and you can begin to shout directions down to other people. When you read your Bible, look for the big picture, for this message that weaves through the whole narrative over and over from beginning to end—that without love every victory is a defeat, every gain is a loss, every mission is dead, and every one of us is cut off from our true identity. When you read your Bible from the upper floors you can see that the story happened out there in history so that the story can happen in here in me. And love is the story.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love is the opposite of our egos, but love is not the opposite of us. Love is our true identity.